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ABSTRACT

"Thick descriptions" are descriptions that are layered enough to draw conclusions and uncover the intentions of a given act, event, or process. In a video environment, thick descriptions are images, gestures, or sequences that convey meaning. Neither the quantity nor the resolution of the images makes the descriptions thick. Thickness is created by the ability of the visual description to transmit what is really being 'said.' In a video or videodisc environment, thick descriptions provide a way to articulate the meaning of what is seen and help come to terms with one of the problems of observational research, the fact that it tends to resist any kind of systematic evaluation and, like all interpretive approaches, it is "imprisoned in its own immediacy or detail." The phrase, coined by Gilbert Ryle, has been explored by Clifford Geertz in interpretive studies of culture. In ethnographic filmmaking, thick descriptions result not only from what has been recorded and edited, but from what has not been selected. In ethnography, the task of building a theoretical framework is to make thick descriptions possible in order to generalize within the particular event. Thick descriptions could be integrated within interactive hypermedia. The challenge would be to create an environment in which the integrity of the data is intact, the interpretation of the creators of the media is kept within bounds, and the user executes a certain degree of discretion in the use of the tool. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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THICK DESCRIPTIONS: A LANGUAGE FOR ARTICULATING ETHNOGRAPHIC MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

by

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I. The Origin of Thick Descriptions

Thick descriptions are descriptions which are layered enough to draw conclusions and uncover the intentions of a given act, event, or process. In a video environment, *thick descriptions* are images, gestures, or sequences which convey meaning. Neither the quantity nor the resolution of the images make the descriptions thick. What creates thickness is the ability of the visual description to transmit what is really being 'said.' The reason for understanding the necessity of *thick descriptions* in a video or videodisc environment is that they provide us with a way to articulate the meaning of what we see, and, they help us come to terms with one of the problems inherent in observational research - the fact that it tends to resist any kind of systematic evaluation and, like all interpretive approaches, it is "imprisoned in its own immediacy or detail." [1]

[1] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, [New York: Basic Books, 1973], p.24.

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An understanding of *thick descriptions* is a welcome oasis for those of us interested in making sense of our observations of the world, in communicating our interpretation of these observations to others, and in learning from the experiences of others. Clifford Geertz, expanding on the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle's coining of the phrase *thick descriptions*, provides *an oasis*, a place where layers of meaning exist for our interpretation. Both Geertz and Ryle use descriptions of either real or fictional situations to explain their ideas - the philosopher, Ryle, uses hypothetical examples whereas Geertz uses his field notes.

Gilbert Ryle does not use *thick* and *thin descriptions* as a means for studying anthropological issues as does Geertz. Instead, Ryle is concerned with the questions: who is the thinker of thoughts; and, what levels of accomplishment are there in the thinking of thoughts? He sees layers of description from thin to thick as a means by which we can determine the purpose and the intention of the action. As he says about a number of people sitting still, chin in hand (le Penseur), each on his or her own rock:

> Notice that in each case there is a thinnest description of what the person is doing, e.g. pencilling a line or a dot on paper, and that this thinnest description requires thickening, often multiple thickening, of a perfectly specific kind before it amounts to an account of what the person is trying to accomplish... [2]

The reason for thickening a description is to understand the meaning of what a person is really doing. Ryle poses the problem of distinguishing between the man sitting on a rock with his chin in his hand and the thinker of thoughts. For example, the person sitting on the rock counting vehicles driving by is not a thinker of thoughts. The person listening to a distant band is not choosing what he hears and, therefore, is also not a thinker of thoughts. The third is going over tunes in his head, but the tune is not of his or her creation....(closer, but not yet what Gilbert Ryle would classify as thinking thoughts). In contrast, the next person on an adjacent rock qualifies as a thinker because he is creating a poem or composing a song. Ryle states two conditions for making this distinction. First, the creator or composer is detached from the immediacy of his circumstances; and second is the fact that the thinker is not coerced and in control of his or her "own bottom-level moves and motions." [3]

One has to ask oneself what it is that Ryle is getting at? Why does he seem to suggest that preparing a lecture requires a higher level of thinking than preparing an after-dinner speech or and electioneering address?

> In contrast with the electioneer, the will-be lecturer, at least if he cares about his subject and about his students, intends not to persuade them of anything but to instruct them..... *le Penseur*...is unlike the composing electioneer and like the composing lecturer.[4]

According to Ryle, applying the notion of thick *descriptions* is crucial in understanding the different levels of sophistication of the thinker of thoughts. Consider the way in which Ryle uses thin and thick in the following passage:

> As jumping a stream in order to find out if it is jumpable is on a higher sophistication-level than jumping to get to the other side, so exploring is on a higher sophistication-level than piloting, which in its turn is on a higher sophistication-level than following a pilot's lead. Similarly, Euclid trying to find the proof of a new theorem is working on a higher accomplishment-level than Euclid trying to teach students his proof when he has got it; and trying to teach it is on a higher accomplishment-level than that on which his students are working in trying to master it.
>
> None the less it may still be true that the only thing that, under its thinnest description, Euclid is here and now doing is muttering to himself a few geometrical words and phrases, or scrawling on paper or in the sand a few rough and fragmentary lines. This is far, very far, from being all that he is doing; but it may very well be the only thing that he is doing. [5] (underlining added)

Our Oxford scholar seems to be distinguishing among the hierarchies or levels of accomplishment in a given task. What is worth noting is that a large number of our most revered scholars and intellectual leaders have invested most of their scholarship to finding systems of thinking which place thinking into hierarchies.

II. Thick Descriptions:

- hierarchies of accomplishment to hierarchies of meaning -

Within the last hundred or more years, theories about thinking have followed the developmental theme - Freud's oral, anal, genital; Eric Erikson eight stages of human development from trust to generativity; Piaget's pre-operational to formal operations - reflecting a search for the organization of thinking into stages or hierarchies of accomplishment. Theoretical endeavours in the humanities turned to the new belief in science for constructing their models for understanding the nature of the human mind. It is my opinion that epistemologists could benefit by taking a closer and more critical look at how this came to be.

[2] Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, Volume II (New York: Barnes and Nobles Inc.,1971), p.498.
[3] *Ibid*.., p. 489

[4] *Ibid*.., p. 489.
[5] *Ibid*., pp. 496-497.

In an evocative article called, "The Inversion of Mastery," E. E. Sampson traces the roots of why certain 'facts' became more valid than others in this search for understanding the thinking process, and how the status quo of power-based relationships was maintained in spite of the Renaissance. According to Sampson, the Enlightenment changed the ownership of who ordained the 'facts,' but the same patriarchal belief held by the Church (that 'man' must control, tame, and master nature, which is female) was passed to those who replaced the belief in god with the belief in science and technology: "Through science and technology, man would come to dominate the unruly forces of Nature and so clearly establish his sovereignty."[6]

Sampson's thesis is that this relationship between people and nature will eventually backfire and our mastery over nature will lead us into submission:

> The tasks of mastery over nature demand a kind of patriarchal and commanding relationship between people and nature that fosters an instrumental process of reasoning and thinking; that is, reasoning is employed as an instrument or tool designed to accomplish the ends of greater control over a particular phenomenon. As that process dominates humanity and comes to define and organize the entirety of human knowledge, we see the inversion of mastery into submission. [7]

In other words, certain models of thinking - those of mastery and competition rather than negotiation and co-operation - have determined which models for understanding thinking we assume to be of greater significance. This view of our human nature has lead to the compartmentalization of thought into hierarchies of accomplishment which ultimately alienate us from our own thinking. Not all developmental theories are patriarchal in spirit, yet it may be true that underlying the premises of the developmentalists is the tendency to think about thinking as a competitive struggle within the self for higher levels of accomplishment.

In defiance of this conception of knowledge as a stage-like hierarchy of dominance, the new breed of epistemologists are rethinking their thoughts on thinking. In her book, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Evelyn Fox Keller, influenced by Thomas Kuhn's ideas about the nature of scientific thinking and by Freud's 'analysis' of the different relationship between young boys and their mothers and between girls and their mothers, reaches a conclusion that scientific thinking is gender-bound (and, historically preferential to the male way of thinking). Her insights open the door for thinking about science in personal and social, rather than objective and "anti-social" ways:

> Just as science is not the purely cognitive endeavor we once thought it, neither is it as impersonal as we thought: science is a deeply personal as well as a social activity. [8]

Seymour Papert, author of *Mindstorms*, and Sherry Turkle, author of *The Second Self*, have initiated a research project focusing on how the context of culture affects different *styles of thinking*. Rather than breaking human cognition into stages or levels, Papert proposes the creation of learning environments where individuals with diverse styles of thinking can have equal opportunity to the tools they need to build their own (micro)*worlds*. His belief in the importance of observing the growth of cultures in the context of new technologies has led to the implementation of *Project Headlight* at the Hennigan School in Jamaica Plains where some of us researchers are investigating the various styles of children's understanding of their knowledge from as wide a range of approaches as possible. Although some of the research of Papert's Learning and Epistemology Group at the MIT Media Lab have followed the more traditional models of the social sciences with control and experimental groups, ethnographic approaches of observation, description, and interpretation are being explored and experimented with. In fact, even within the ethnographic group a wide discrepancy exists about how close to the traditions of ethnography one need follow to say one is doing ethnography. Once again, the boundaries are being extended with the use of video, videodisc, and hypercard as a design and an authoring system for the disc. One wonders whether this approach needs to have a new name or whether the boundaries of ethnography can include these experimental methodologies within its existing framework.

Other noteworthy investigators are Kenwyn Smith [9] who takes the cybernetic approach by examining the role of resilience rather than the search for stability in the human reaction, and, Donald Polkinghorne [10] who refers to the new direction in epistemology as the movement from the positivist approach - only that which we know to be true can be called knowledge - to the post-positivist - that which we know now may be the best understanding about the truth, but may not include all that the truth is.

Clifford Geertz also breaks with the traditional hierarchical attitude toward knowledge in a somewhat different manner. In his interpretative study of culture, he states that the "analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of

[6] E.E. Sampson, "The Inversion of Mastery," *Cybernetics*, volume 2, number 1, [Virginia: George Mason University, 1986], p. 27.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 27.

[8] Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985], p.7.
9. Kenwyn K. Smith, "Epistemological Problems in Researching Human Relations," in David N. Berg and Kenwyn K. Smith (eds.), *Exploring Clinical Methods for Social Science Research* (Beverly Hills, London, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 1985].
[10] Donald Polkinghorne, *Methodology for the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984)

meaning." [11] He accredits his reasoning that people are "suspended in webs of significance"[12] to Max Weber. The purpose of doing ethnography is to sort out the layers of inference and implication of what happens in any given event. Separating the *thin descriptions* from the *thick descriptions* sets up a *hierarchy* of meaningful structures in order to gain a deeper and richer view of that particular culture. Geertz is not establishing *hierarchies* of accomplishment of the various cultures; he speaks of hierarchies of meaning which lead to *commensurability*, the ability of one culture to translate - to find a reasonable facsimile in their own culture for - the meaning of another culture's *web of significance*.

> Looked at in this way, the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of discourse....As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which whey can be intelligibly– that is, thickly– described. 13 (underlining added)

According to Geertz, if we are to gain insight into the meaning of a particular culture, we need to understand how the theory of signs, *semiotics*, is interwoven with all the events, behaviors, and institutions which make up the culture (or the context). In describing a certain event thickly, we begin to get beyond the surface interpretation of any particular sign or gesture. We enter a deeper layer of interpretation if we can determine what the gesture - a person sitting on a rock with her chin resting in her hand - means for that person. When described thickly, we can begin to understand what the gesture signifies. We can separate whether it means that our person on the rock is simply resting her head, pretending to look like she is deep in thought to impress the person next to her, making fun of another person who is sitting in a similar fashion a few rock down the beach, or rehearsing for some part in a play where looking pensive is required. As Aaron Falbel writes:

> The question posed by the ethnographer is not just 'What's going on?' -though it is that too - but also, 'What does it mean?' (hermeneutics) and 'What does it signify?' (semiotics). In other words, the ethnographer tries to get at what *lies behind* the observable activity, for the purpose of placing that activity within an intelligible frame." [1488]

[11] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc.,1973), p. 5.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 14..

[14] Aaron Falbel, "Friskolen 70, An Ethnographically Informed Inquirey into the Social Context of Learning," unpublished doctoral thesis, Media Lab, MIT, Cambridge, p. 31.

Geertz uses Ryle's example about the contraction of the eye-lids (winks upon winks upon winks) to show how easy it is to misinterpret the meaning of a wink. This gesture could be a twitch, a wink, a parody or a rehearsal for a parody. According to Geertz, signifiers - the twitch or wink - are symbolic acts which, when textured enough to render meaning, eventually create a language through which the act can be expressed and communicated to others.

In conclusion to this section and as introduction to the next section on ethnographic filmmaking, I would like to quote Geertz:

> Culture, this acted document, is thus public, like a burlesque wink or a mock sheep raid. Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. The interminable, because unterminable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is "subjective" or "objective," together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults ("idealist! - materialist!"; "mentalist!" - "behaviorist!"; "impressionist! - positivist!") which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there are true twitches) symbolic action - action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies - the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other - they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: *what it is*, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, *is getting said*." [15] (underlining and italics added)

III.The Importance of Thick Descriptions in Ethnographic Filmmaking

It is often stated that anthropologists study the way people live in different parts of the world, or rather, in different cultures. Some anthropologists are more interested in how those people think about their lives. Geertz emphasizes the fact that "anthropologists don't study villages, they study in villages." For Geertz, if you want to understand anthropology or any science, then you should examine what those who do it do. Thus, in order to understand what anthropology is, it is important to describe what it is that anthropologists do. According to Geertz, anthropologists do ethnography. They establish rapport, select subjects (or, as he says, 'informants'), take notes, keep journals, and collect any other "relevant" data such as maps, genealogies, or texts. (Then they usually return to their university environments to write their books or journals about

[15] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 12.

Life with the Bella-Coola Indians of the Pacific Northwest, or some such subject. This is the *thin description* of their work!)

If we look at the ethnographer in a thick way, then we must do what Geertz says the ethnographer does - reach broad conclusions from small, dense, textured pieces of information. Ethnographers begin their documentation by accepting the fact that what they record in their field notes is already an interpretation of an event. The recording of the event is, in some respect, 'fiction,' because it is a 'picture' of what the person who is participating in the event is experiencing. Moreover, the observer/recorder, by her presence in the environment, is affecting the culture within which she is collecting her data. Readers of all the social sciences have a naive tendency to accept the results of researchers who have gone 'into the field' to do their studies without questioning the underlying biases of this initial phase of the documentation; they do not ask the following questions: When does the ethnographer *put pencil to paper*? When does the ethnographic filmmaker turn on the camera? What does she select to record? What does she not select?What is in the frame and what is not? What detail is focused on and what is excluded. What does she experience while she is recording, looking through the viewfinder? What does she stop experiencing of the event she is recording, the moment she starts the process?

The main question to ask is how does the ethnographic filmmaker provide us with thick descriptions in her recording of people, processes or events in spite of the fact that what she records is an interpretation of an event? [16] If we believe that communicating with other cultures is crucial for the welfare of our planet, or, on a less grand but nevertheless important scale, helpful for our day to day relationships with people around us, who are microcosms of the cultures they come from, then understanding what the written document or the film is intonating - when it shows someone contracting her eyelids, or raising her eyebrows, or scratching her forehead - becomes the basis for our discourse with that culture.

How does the ethnographic filmmaker provide us with thick descriptions? To answer this we need to be aware of not only what has been selected in the recording and editing process, but also, what has not been selected. In a Richard Leacock film, ten or more Barry Goldwater campaign organizers are sitting in a hotel room discussing the campaign while, at the same time, lunch is being served to them by a very conscientious young waiter. He asks the politicians which of them ordered the rare steak, the medium rare, etc. At first, the camera's focus is on the political discussion. But, *instinctively*, Ricky realizes that the 'truer' story [17] about the way these guys operate is the confusion they create as they each go about figuring out which steak is the one they each ordered! The shift of focus from the business of campaigning to the finding of their steaks provides a *thicker description* of the situation than would have been possible had Ricky stayed with the 'content' of the meeting. In fact, it almost becomes the content of the sequence! What I am referring to is not just a better shot made for aesthetic purposes, although that is not irrelevant in the thickness of the description. What Ricky did was to make a very stong statement about how these politicians make decisions by capturing the *modus operandi* which each of them uses to get what he wants – in this case, the steak which he ordered. This recording of data (or what a filmmaker refers to as 'rushes') is the first stage in the process of ethnographic filmmaking which may influence the total thickness of the description of a person, action or event. Ricky Leacock makes an instinctive and spontaneous decision about what to record; his peripheral vision seems to catch more of the intention of the action than does the sequence of the logical, chronological events. Not only does he reject; he selects, and vice versa. This function is first instinctual and then becomes precise and deliberate.

Last spring I drove to Washington to do a simple video piece on cherry blossoms. While out shooting, a friend mentioned that free food was being prepared and given to the homeless outside the Capital; immediately, I went to see what was going on there. I took shots of the men eating, the mushy food in huge pots (reminiscent of labour and concentration camps), the snow falling on the cherry blossoms, and of the Capital looming above in a grey mist. One toothless black man in his thirties kept talking to me while I took my shots; I responded with reluctance to his persistent banter . . . until I realized that the *story* was not just the juxtaposition of blossoms and snow, nor of grandeur and poverty; the story was about this man's persistent interest in my activity. He wanted to know what I was doing and why. He wanted to make contact with me, to get my phone number and call me in Boston. The moment I became aware of my *reluctance* to film him, I shifted my focus and let the camera record how he talked to me, how he found a wet match-package in the garbage to write down my telephone number, how he bit off the wood at the nib of the pencil so it would be sharp enough to write with, and how he smiled shyly and winked one eye when he spoke of where he lived and why he comes to eat a meal at the steps of the Capital. What I am saying is that he became the story not because of the story he told me. He became the story because, as the filmmaker, I realized that he was the story; every movement, gesture, and action of his added more thickness about his way of coping with his life. The 'truth' (or *interpretation*, as Geertz would say,) about this event lies embedded in the richness of my visual description of a man standing in the rainy snow trying to write down a phone number of a woman holding a camera.

The second stage in the process of ethnographic filmmaking which influences the thickness of the description - the editing of the documentary - also adds another layer of interpretation. In *N'ai*, a film by the documentary filmmaker and ethnographer, John Marshall, the African

[16] Ricki Goldman Segall, "Video Technology as a Conceptual Research Tool for the Study of Human Theory Making," in the *Computer Human Interaction Special Interest Group Bulletin*, April, 1989.
[17] See Heider for the problems in "telling the truth" in documentary filmmaking.

Bushmen are out on a hunt to kill a giraffe. The men run up to their prey throwing their poisoned spears at this majestic beast. After a long chase, the giraffe finally falls, affected by the slow-acting poison. The fall is not tragic, nor sad. The viewer does not experience the hunt as a cruel, unnecessary act of the human against the beast. Quite the contrary, the delicate balance of nature is seen in the careful attention to both the men and the giraffe. The beauty of *this* film as a tool for understanding the event is that the observation, recording, and selection of material for of sequences is so sensitive, so *thick*, that the viewer can see as close a replication of the experience as possible - in this case, the thin and hungry look of the men and the frail poise of the giraffe. The Bushmen's throwing of the spears is not an act of hatred for the animal, but rather an act of respect for a giraffe which will provide the sustenance for life. The Bushmen don't rejoice in the killing; they rejoice in the knowledge that they and their families can eat again. As strong an image, the gentle falling of the giraffe to the earth, as it is, so is the image of the sleek walk of the Bushmen on their hunt. The manner in which this sequence is edited is made even more powerful by a contrasting scene when the white park warden comes to the village to tell the tribe that they cannot kill giraffes anymore. He explains how the preservation of the giraffes has to take precedence over their needs. Although the warden is a kind-speaking person, the juxtaposition of these scenes makes you question how the balance which the Bushmen maintained with their environment for centuries has suddenly become endangered. The very people paying the price for the rape of their land are the indigenous peoples who knew how to live and how to die with what nature provided for them. Sad. Kate Higginson, a thirteen year old girl, understood the intention of the movie as embedded in the thickness of the description when, after watching the film, she said:

> It's so sad. They can't live in the world they used to live in because it doesn't exist anymore; and they can never fit into the world the white people live in either. What will happen to them?[18]

In concluding this section on how thick descriptions can help us articulate the meaning of what we see as 'data' in ethnographic filmmaking, we must finally come to grips with perhaps the most puzzling quote by Geertz:

> The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything - literature, dreams, symptoms, culture - is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment....You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, accept it or you do not. Imprisoned in the immediacy of its own detail, it is presented as self-validating, or worse, as validated by the supposedly developed sensitivities of the person who presents it; any attempt to cast what it says in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty - as, the anthropologists severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric.[19] (underlining added)

[18] Kate Higginson, visitor from Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

It seems that Geertz is saying that most ethnographers would believe that any building of theory is an ethnocentric travesty because it builds theories from its own cultural biases. On the one hand, it seems that he is suggesting a need for conceptual articulation and systematic modes of assessment: the *sin* is that interpretative approaches resist this articulation! On the other hand, I cannot but believe that Geertz says this 'tongue in cheek,' and that he himself realizes that, for all its imprisonment in its own detail, interpretations of descriptions are all that we ethnographers have. Nonetheless, Geertz says that if indeed we want to consider our field a science, then we must formulate a conceptual framework even if the terms in which it is expressed are nearly nonexistent. The task of building a theoretical framework is to make *thick descriptions* possible in order to generalize within the particular event! In other words, within each event, we should be able to start with a set of signifiers or symbolic acts and to analyze how they fit into the framework of social discourse. This does not preclude the possibility of using theoretical ideas from one study to the next. As each new interpretive study yields its theoretical frameworks, certain discoveries are made. Geertz's 'acid-test' for theoretical ideas are their usefulness. If they continue to be used, revised, elaborated upon, then they are defensible interpretations; if they stop being used, then they are reformulated and eventually discarded.

When we consider the ethnography of the documentary film, we are struck with the difficulty in assessing the conceptual framework of a film by Ricky Leacock or one by John Marshall. Yet, we can begin to see that a language of signifiers emerges in both. It is not the same language - the politicians asking for their steaks and the Bushmen spearing the giraffe - but within each a language of symbolic acts emerges, and this sensitivity to the uniqueness of the thick description within each builds a discourse between them. What I am suggesting is that the documentary film may have more than stylistic similarities. In fact, if Geertz's theory of *thick descriptions is* correct, then, a vocabulary of signifiers may be the basis for a conceptual framework wherein individual films articulate meanings which can be used to aid our understanding of others. "Thus it is not only interpretation that goes all the way down to the most immediate observational level: the theory upon which such interpretation conceptually depends does so also." [20]

Certain forms of media have the potential to unlock the original "raw" data to the user and thereby allow access to the theoretical assumptions embedded implicitly or explicitly by the

[19] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 24.

[20] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 28.

researcher. In fact, this approach could bring the user through the layers of interpretation towards the actual context in which the event took place. In the following section of this paper, I will discuss the meaning of Geertz's *thick descriptions* in light of the new technologies available to us.

IV. Thick Descriptions in Interactive Hyper Media

Perhaps the term *interactive* is still a misnomer since the existence of a truly responsive technological medium has not yet been created. In spite of this fact, the spirit in which the interactive technologies is being designed is one in which the individual will provide greater mastery, or mistressy, in her ability both to delve deeper into the caverns of meaning and to branch outwardly making new links or associations.

What I am talking about is the creation of an interactive environment which would integrate some of the principles in Geertz's thick descriptions. In fact, this statement implies that many current interactive environments do not offer this kind of experience to the user. Perhaps the best way, of explaining why I believe this, is to discuss a few of the interactive or hyper-media environments which I have seen and compare them with my vision for, as Ivan Illich might suggest, a *convivial* learning environment with interactive video technology.

At Brown University, the Institute for Research in Information and Scholarship (IRIS) uses interactive hyper-media environments for the purpose of supplementing course work. Several professors from different disciplines have worked with the interface designers to use this medium in a way which would integrate the technology with the curriculum. The terminals are located in an open space in the basement of a building on campus. Students sit in rows at their terminals. The course work ranges from History, to English Literature, to Biology. The most dense program is the one on English Literature. A student can choose a certain poet or a writer and then follow the various paths established by the professor and the designer. The number of paths are only limited by the time and effort put into the development of the program and by the richness of the subject matter. The English Literature environment allows the student to go along different paths either by going deeper into the subject matter - finding out more about the meaning of a poem, or searching for definitions of certain words - or by branching outward to other possible overlapping fields, such as art, philosophy, history (or whatever else the designer and content person, the professor, decided was relevant). In a sense, one can see this environment as a multi-media environment with lots of different rooms made available to the user. The user has choices; but the choices, as in most interactive environments, are limited. The persons who selected and arranged the material did so according to their biases and with their intentions. Instead of getting closer to the original material, the user gets closer to the way of

thinking of the designers. This may not necessarily be bad, but it does not make close the gap between the original intention of the material and the user. The user must deal with another layer of interpretation. (What Geertz is recommending is thicker descriptions and not thicker interpretations.) The professor who sends her students to a library is perhaps doing a better service for her students' formulation of uncovering a range of opinions wherein some negotiated understanding lies. The professor who uses this model of hyper-media may be providing students with a thicker description of her own thick interpretation of the material. Nevertheless, perhaps, we could compare someone like George Landow, the professor at Brown University who designed the English Literature program to someone like Ricky Leacock who also provides the user/viewer with an interpretation through a thick description. Ricky Leacock leaves the viewer with questions which cannot be answered, but rather felt, or intuited, whereas, I believe Professor Landow answers questions and instructs by providing his version of the context..

One of the more exciting components of Landow's work is his belief in providing students with what Geertz would commend - the *context* of the subject matter. The question facing future researchers of these new technologies will be: Can the hyper media environment create a place in which the context or the *culture*, as Geertz would say, is felt, understood and can be expressed to others? It is my contention that there is a way to get even closer to the original 'experience' of the material by leaving a few more doors open to the user, thereby creating what could be considered an *interactive* environment where thick descriptions are created by the user and not the designer.

Watching innovative technology being integrated into the existing institutional forms of education has always disturbed me, even if, as in this case, the usage is both well presented and informative. Instead of having any affect on offering real alternatives to traditional education, innovations get absorbed within the existing structures. What is missing is the vision of what a technological tool can do to enhance our thinking about ourselves and the world around us. Why not use the technology to do what we cannot do, or at least, cannot do as well, in other contexts? Why not read a poem in bed, or by the sea, or in a library with other books, and use the computer enriched environment for something which expands our way of thinking? With this humanist view, let me return to the central argument of this section: How do we begin to articulate what kind of experience is happening to the user of these interactive technologies?

Let me contrast the IRIS model with another media environment designed by Glorianna Davenport at MIT. A three hour movie called *New Orleans in Transition*, edited with the intention of being used for interactive video-disc, is accessible at a workstation to users who are, as China Altman, writer for the MIT newspaper, puts it, *pilots* rather than *passengers*. The user can choose to see the movie in its entirety, or to follow different people or places throughout the redevelopment of the Vieux Carré at the time when New Orleans was preparing itself for the World's Fair. The film is a complex and intricate *web of significance;* a detailed ethnographic

study of people who are affecting and being affected by changes in their physical environment. Moreover, while the thread that brings these diverse individuals and events together in one film may be the urban redevelopment theme, the fact is that alternative threads 'pop up' which could be just as significant depending on the interests of the viewer. In other words, in this environment, the user is given the tools to follow his or her own theme (without destroying the integrity of the film).

The intention of the design of the technology is to give the user the access to the source material without the designer's delineation of what the user should or should not *learn*. As a researcher of epistemology, I am fundamentally concerned with the creation of open-ended learning environments wherein *whose* thick description we are discussing is of vital concern. Perhaps what I am hinting at is an environment in which the integrity of the original data is intact, the interpretation of the creators of the media is kept within bounds, and the user executes a certain degree of discretion in his or her use of the tool.

Let us imagine that we are viewing the film *New Orleans in Transition* on the interactive video-disc workstation. The video part of the monitor depicts a windowless room with some of the main 'characters' discussing the architect's proposal for the glass structure designed for the to-be-renovated Jax Brewery. One woman, uncomfortable with the all present camera is seen with an agitated look on her face. Our first impression of her is not a particularly good one. She seems to add to the tension already existing between the architect and Lambert, the director of the Vieux Carré Commission (VCC). Over and over, we encounter Lynda Friedmann, the woman who appears both helpless and powerful at the same time. Being interested in human interaction, my first inclination is to find out more about her. Through a simple query to the data base, by *mousing* an *icon*, I can access the *dossier* or biography of this seemingly meek woman who held the position as director of the VCC for seven years. In fact, I can easily find the kind of background information which previously would only have been available to the filmmaker - time line of the events, stills of the Vieux Carré, stills of the Vieux Carré, maps and even budgets which influenced the decisions. I can begin to ask myself questions that an investigative journalist would ask: To what possible inside information was Lynda Friedmann privy? How is she a useful ally of a developer and an architect who want their buildings built? How does she go about her professional negotiations throughout the course of this film? The fact is that as a viewer I do not only receive; I ask questions which are my questions.

The thickness of my final description of Lynda is partially a result of the filmmaker/video-disc designer's ability to provide me with the tools to be my own detective. Some of these tools are embedded in the richness of description given to me; some of them exist in the interface which allows me to accumulate the sequences of Lynda and juxtapose them with other relevant data. What emerges is a detailed picture of Lynda as we witness her ability to fit into each

situation with greater agility and determination. My initial image of Lynda sitting in the windowless room with an agitated and uncomfortable expression takes on a new significance. She is not a frustrated secretary listening to her boss explain why glass is a wonderful material for the new Jax Brewry; nor is she a bored business woman trying to finish the day's work. Lynda is an central force in the play which unfolds; and each new expression and gesture gives us, the detectives, one more key to solving the puzzle about how individual attitudes affect the decisions which are made. As the filmmaker, Glorianna Davenport, states: "If you can give the viewer more knowledge, then the viewer can better understand how these decisions are made."[21] (Note: she used the word, *knowledge*, and not *information* !)

An interesting dilemma facing the builders of new technologies is how to deal with the the fact that by giving the user this degree of freedom with the source material the intention of those who experienced the original event, as well as the intention of the recorder and interface designer, could be changed to a point where neither is recognizable? In other words, what happens to the meaning of an event which was originally experienced by the subjects and seen through the eyes of the filmmaker/ethnographer, if the pieces or units are taken out of context and misrepresented by the user? One could answer that in fact this occurs in every medium, especially in newspapers where politicians daily claim that they did not mean *this* when they said *that* ! Do we as researchers concern ourselves with how this new technology could add to even thicker descriptions of an event or with how it could create even greater misrepresentations of events? The image that comes to mind is one of Humpty Dumpty sitting on his wall having a great fall! Could interactive video technology create a collection of pieces which cannot be put together even by all the king's horses and all the king's men? How can we ensure that the whole will survive if we break certain pieces apart? Perhaps this question could be addressed at some later date by taking an even deeper look into the interpretative theory of Clifford Geertz.

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[21] Glorianna Davenport, Film/Video Section, Media Lab, MIT, Cambridge.

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